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ABSTRACT

Part of a 10 booklet series on talented and gifted education, the booklet describes the characteristics of talented and gifted children during the preschool and school years. The underachieving gifted child is discussed in terms of emotional problems, school programing, and cultural difference. Special traits and skills needed for teachers of the gifted are also reviewed. Information is presented to further parents' understanding of talent and giftedness, to help both schools and parents plan the best programs for talented and gifted children both in and out of school. (Author/DLS)

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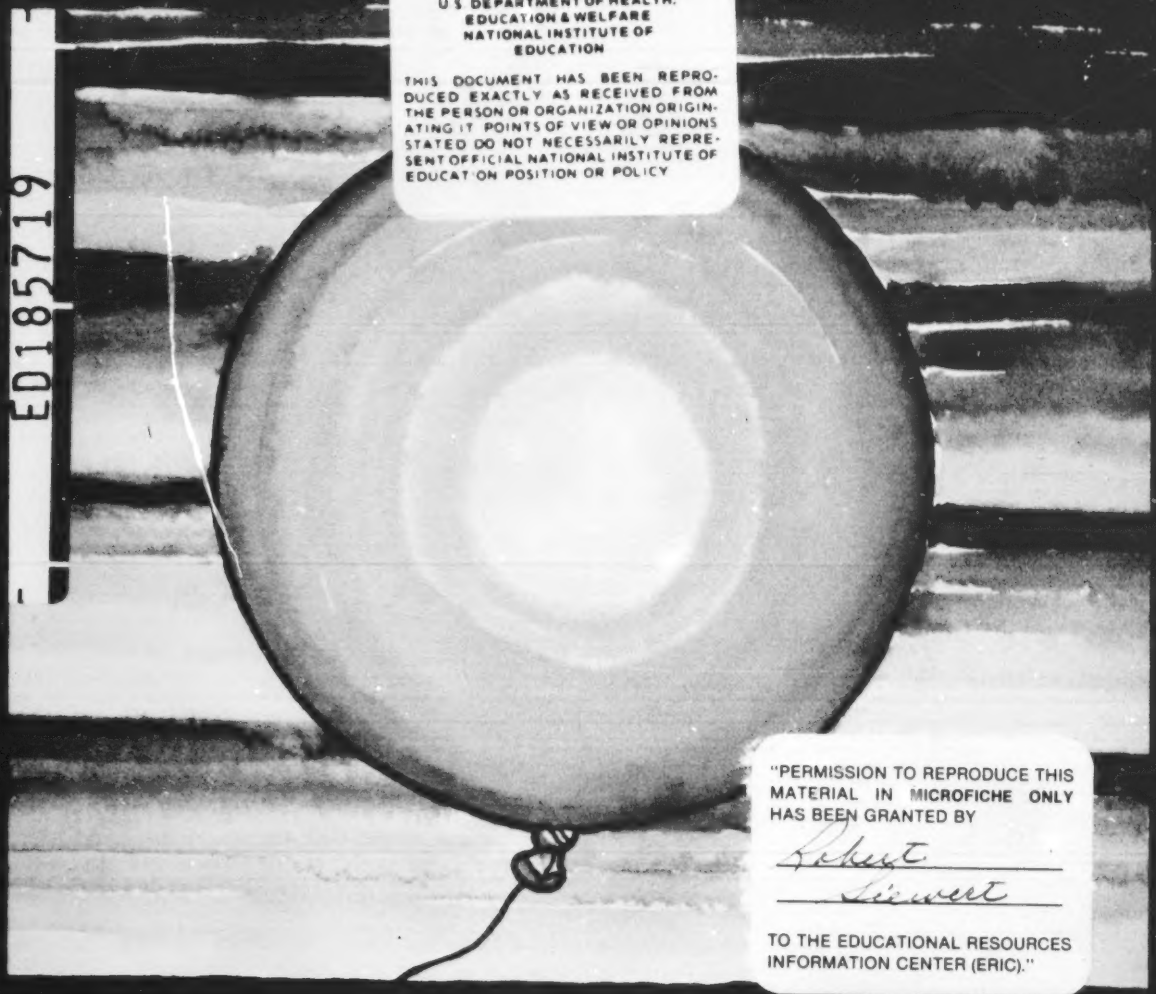

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Characteristics of Talented and Gifted Children

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CHARACTERISTICS OF TALENTED AND GIFTED CHILDREN

Sandra K. Howell

This series was cooperatively developed by the following: Project Director - Robert Siewert, Specialist, Talented and Gifted Programs, Oregon Department of Education, Salem, Oregon; Project Coordinator - Carleen Matthews, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Series Editor - Candy Withycombe; and Richard Arends, University of Oregon.

Oregon Association for Talented And Gifted

Oregon State DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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FOREWORD

This booklet describes the characteristics of talented and gifted children during the preschool years and school years. Special issues of the underachieving gifted child, emotional problems, school programming and the "culturally different" are described. Special traits and skills needed for teachers of the gifted are also listed. Information is given to further parents' understanding of talent and giftedness, which should help both schools and parents plan the best programs for talented and gifted children, in school and outside of school.

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INTRODUCTION

Society has long been fascinated with individuals who make outstanding contributions. Philosophy, science, government, and the arts have all been shaped and developed by individuals who were able to see things a little differently and to do things in a new or better way.

Social scientists who have studied eminent people have observed traits which seem to account for their advanced growth. Children who exhibit the same traits or characteristics have the potential for outstanding performance. Our future and the world's future may rest in the hands of today's talented and gifted children. It is hoped that recognition of the characteristics of the talented and gifted in our schools will lead to the design of school programs which both respect those characteristics and help develop each child's fullest potential.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

HOW PARENTS SUPPORT GROWTH

The beginning of appropriate education for gifted children, as for all children, starts in early childhood. Often parents recognize traits in their young children which lead them to suspect that their son or daughter is different. That "differentness," however, may be greeted with a variety of parenting responses. The alertness and curiosity which lead the toddler to open drawers, taste dirt, bang pans and demand the identity of dozens of objects is welcomed and encouraged by some parenting styles. These same parents delight in their child's discovery of the world and take joy in the child's growing powers of observation. Parents who value compliance and conformity may discourage the curious child by showing displeasure when the child experiments with objects and asks a number of questions. Alertness and curiosity, the ability to name and compare many objects, sensitivity to detail and persistence, are some of the early traits which may lead to giftedness in school behavior. The continuation of abilities may be largely dependent upon parental acceptance and encouragement of those abilities.

TRAITS OF PRESCHOOL GIFTED CHILDREN

Not all gifted children display the same kinds of behavior. Some speak at an unusually early age, while other children choose to speak infrequently until they can produce full sentences. Some children rush

unhesitatingly into activities and become so totally involved that they seem unaware of danger. Another child might analyze, evaluate and calculate before entering into play or may prefer to remain in the role of observer. Some children begin to specialize, indicating particular interests by displaying specific talents very early, while others remain generalists who are interested in a wide variety of experiences. In some ways gifted children are like all children. The specific characteristics of each talented and gifted child combine in a way that produces a unique individual, who sees and reacts to the environment in a very unique way. It is that uniqueness that we refer to as giftedness.

The ways gifted children differ from other children of the same age may have become quite noticeable by the time chidren enter school. It is not unusual for the gifted child of five or six to have a vocabulary more typical of a child several years older. The child may have begun to read as early as two or three years of age, although it is not unusual for gifted children to begin reading after they enter school. The gifted child is often a capable child who delights in being able to perform tasks which enhance personal independence. This growing independence can be a source of pride as well as great frustration.

SOURCES OF FRUSTRATION

The youngster who is capable of making a simple purchase at a nearby shopping center may feel that parents are being unnecessarily restrictive when they prohibit the child from riding a tricycle on three busy streets to get there. Similarly, the child who has successfully used a can opener and toaster may feel restricted when parents limit the use of more dangerous appliances to those situations they supervise. Children expect to be able to make their bodies do what

they want them to do and can become angry or cry when motor skills lag behind mental development.

Another source of frustration for the young and gifted child is a lack of understanding that others of the same age may have different interests. Gifted children may spend long periods of time gathering information which is difficult for them to share. The eagerly asked question, "Did you know that snakes have three hundred bones in their backs?" may be brushed off by the disinterest of a child who is totally involved in a game of catch. Hopefully there is an older child or an adult nearby who will express interest in the gifted child's new found discovery.

HOW PARENTS HELP SCHOOLS PLAN

Parents of highly skilled preschool children may want to contact the principal or classroom teacher before school begins. The teacher will then have time to prepare for the child, by gathering special materials or scheduling time for the child with children of similar abilities.

The child who enters kindergarten or first grade already reading, writing and able to do simple calculations poses a planning problem for the classroom teacher. The teacher will need to provide a separate academic curriculum for this child. Children who are not provided appropriate curriculum may hide their abilities in an attempt to please the teacher, or become bored and turn their energies into disruptive behavior. Some gifted children become class clowns or rebels in this way.

SCHOOL YEARS

Gifted children's behavior in school is characterized by their giftedness and the classroom atmosphere. The traits which help us identify cildren as gifted will be strengthened through acceptance and encouragement. If these same traits are viewed as undesirable and discouraged, less likeable behaviors may emerge.

GIFTEDNESS AND EARLY READING

Perhaps the most commonly recognized characteristic of gifted children is that they read one, two or more years ahead of others of the same age. That reading may occur in a wide variety of ways. Some children read everything from cereal boxes to encyclopedias, while other children may read only stories. Still other children may read only for information, concentrating on "how to" books. Gifted children generally discover early that reading provides both information and pleasure. Reading may be discouraged by parents who want their children to be more physically active, or who fear the damaging of their children's eyes by early literacy. Such fears have been discounted by the medical profession. It is recommended that parents see that the child reads in proper light, and in a seated rather than prone position. Teachers may discourage reading in different ways. Some gifted children may read books of their own choosing when they are expected to participate in class activities. Some teachers may then demand that the child put away the book and force participation in other tasks. Parents and teachers discourage reading

most when they make themselves unavailable to children when the child is ready to share personally interesting thoughts and material read.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFTED CHILD'S THINKING

Another characteristic of gifted children is an interest in cause and effect relationships. This, coupled with a questioning attitude, a certain amount of skepticism and some beginning skills in critical thinking, may result in a challenge to teachers' statements. Some teachers view this as an opportunity to explore a subject more deeply and are pleased to have sparked the child's interest. Others view it as a disruption of their presentation and as an attempt to challenge authority.

ISSUES IN CURRICULUM CONTENT AND PACING

Gifted children are often able to move through school subjects faster than their age-mates. A child may show great capability in mathematics by demonstrating an understanding of the number system and by grasping concepts easily and quickly. However, the same child may resist those assignments that are inappropriate to his/her level of skill. An assignment appropriate for "normal" learners may be totally inappropriate in content or pacing for the gifted child. Occasionally gifted children will invent their own systems for problem solving or discover a method of combining functions of a formula. Those efforts may be applauded by teachers as a demonstration of creativity and understanding or rejected as being potentially confusing. The gifted child, like all children, needs emotional support. Since these children tend to be critical of themselves, they tend to be very sensitive to the criticism of others.

THE GIFTED CHILD'S SENSITIVITY

Gifted children tend to be critical of themselves as well as of other children and adults. This tendency grows out of the high expectations which gifted children have of themselves and others. The ability to discriminate, which serves the child well in analyzing, leads to the discovery of discrepancies between people's words and actions. Since the child tends to be idealistic and deeply concerned with justice, these discrepancies are viewed as significant. Older gifted children with high idealism may focus closely on causes related to discrepancies between what societies say and what they actually do. Gifted youngsters are open to new ideas and like to participate in brainstorming and the free wheeling exchange of ideas which lead to new ways of doing things. If parents, schools and societies turn a deaf ear to the suggestions of gifted children, frustration mounts and the gifted children may view the rejection of their ideas as further evidence of a discrepancy in values and actions. Programs designed with the characteristics of the gifted child in mind capitalize on the child's interest in solving real problems, while teaching the techniques of problem solving. These same programs need to help children find acceptance for their own solutions.

ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Many gifted children like work which allows them to demonstrate independence and self-reliance. Within this framework, one may observe intense periods of concentration. The work itself may demonstrate the child's ability to reason, to see relationships and to apply concepts. Most gifted children are able to express themselves exceptionally well verbally. Although handwriting and spelling ability varies greatly, most are also able to express their ideas well in writing.

No discussion of gifted children's characteristics would be complete without a mention of sense of humor. The tendency to see familiar things and situations in unusual ways, the attraction to the unconventional, and highly developed verbal skills blend together to produce a keen sense of humor. The younger child's humor is most often of a gentle nature displaying his or her playfulness and creative imagination. The older child may retain the gentleness or turn his or her wit into devastating put-downs. It is difficult for this child to realize that the wit that attracts a few admiring friends may also repel many other friends.

Some gifted children display characteristics which make them leaders. These children, typically, are self-confident, enthusiastic and popular. They seem to sense what others want and have ideas and suggestions which are acceptable to a group. They may lead the group toward either desirable or undesirable goals. It is important that these children be given opportunities to use their ideas in positive directions.

THE TALENTED CHILD

Talented children may or may not also be intellectually gifted. The talent areas may include art, music, dance, drama, mime, athletics and fine coordination.

THE ARTISTICALLY TALENTED

The artistically talented child shows an early interest in self expression through drawing, painting and/or sculpture. The child is serious about these activities and finds the time to improve techniques. Details are typically well thought out. Originality is apparent in the choice of subject matter, techniques and/or composition. The artistically talented child enjoys not only his or her own work, but the work of others, and is capable of learning from viewing others' art.

THE MUSICALLY TALENTED

The musically talented child shows an unusual sensitivity to rhythm and melody. He or she goes out of the way to listen to music and enters into musical activities with enthusiasm. Those who sing, sing well and enjoy harmonizing with others or singing in a group. The child whose talents are channeled into instrumental music plays one or more instruments and willingly spends the necessary time to practice and perfect techniques. Both singers and instrumentalists use music to express their feelings and may produce original tunes which reflect feelings or experiences.

TALENT IN DANCE

Those whose talent lies in the area of dance are more adept than their peers in expressing their feelings through this kind of media. The young child responds to rhythm by creating original dances. She or he may be unusually able to portray ideas and moods through body movement. As might be expected, the young dancer is highly interested in the art of dance and derives a great deal of satisfaction from the time spent practicing.

DRAMATIC TALENT

Talent in drama and mime is characterized by the child who not only senses the dramatic possibilities of a moment but uses voice, facial expression and body movement to convey that feeling to an audience. This child has the makings of a master story teller, being able to shift easily from one role to another and to use his or her voice to communicate changes in idea and mood. Dramatic children imitate others well. They can capture and portray the nature of animals, people and even things. The time spent actively participating in drama or mime is highly satisfying to this child, as is the time spent viewing other actors. The child's creativity is expressed in original plays which may be performed before a mirror for an audience of one, or for larger groups.

PHYSICALLY TALENTED

The child who shows talent in athletics is one whose performance in competitive physical games is judged to be outstanding. This child brings a high level of energy to the activity and displays coordination which is superior to the coordination of most peers. This child is eager to move on to increasingly complex and

difficult skills, and is willing to spend the time and effort necessary to achieve personal goals.

Other children who show outstanding ability in physical endeavors choose not to express that ability through athletics. Some channel their fine coordination into the playing of musical instruments. Others may choose to build intricate models or to become adept with a variety of tools.

PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' ROLES IN SUPPORTING THE TALENTED

Talented children, like intellectually gifted children, share many characteristics with all children. They tend to do what is valued by those they love and respect. The potential that they show for enhancing their lives and becoming happy, productive adults is a fragile quality easily diminished by non-supportive parents and teachers.

THE UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED CHILD

Not all children who have initially displayed characteristics of giftedness do well in school. Some of this underachievement can be accounted for by a difference in learning styles. There are some individuals who can take in information and process it very efficiently, but have great difficulty expressing themselves in writing and/or speaking. These children may need professional diagnostic and prescriptive help from a learning specialist. Most underachievers, however, are limited producers for other reasons.

Outward and inward pressures account for the behavior of many underachieving children. The child may have set impossibly high standards for herself or himself. It is not unusual for the underachieving gifted child to destroy work or to become immobilized by the realization that it is not possible to produce material which would be acceptable. The child might prefer being thought of as lazy to being thought of as a failure.

Impossibly high standards may also be imposed by well-meaning parents or teachers. No child should be expected to be gifted or creative all the time and few can be productive when they are worried about losing the approval or love of their parents or teachers. Gifted children need to operate from a warm, safe psychological base, assured of adult support. Emphasis can be shifted from succeeding to trying, and praise can be offered for small amounts of progress. Most gifted children resent being manipulated and will react negatively to the teacher who hopes to spur better and

better quality work by withholding top grades. The parent who manipulates by consistently remarking, "It's O.K., but I know you can do better" delivers the message, "No matter what you do, it won't be good enough to satify me."

School learning may not be valued in some gifted children's homes. As these children satisfy their intellectual curiosity, they become aware that a gulf is widening between themselves and their parents. Sooner or later these children must make a decision to either continue to hide their gifts in underachievement, or risk the loss of parental approval.

Age-mates can place pressure on the gifted child. Some children are actively resentful of the gifted child's abilities and will not accept the child socially. The message becomes clear, "Stop achieving if you want to have friends." Junior high school is a time all children are particularly vulnerable to social pressures. The gifted child feels a great need to be like other children and to be liked by them in junior high. Girls seem particularly susceptible to this pressure and worry that they will have no popularity with boys if they have a reputation as a "brain." Gifted children of this age have a strong need to understand their giftedness and to learn how to achieve without becoming socially isolated.

SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

By far the greatest cause of underachievement is inappropriate school programming. Children who enter school eager to learn are sometimes channeled into programs which require them to learn at the same pace as everyone else. Their attempts to share information may be discouraged when a teacher says they are taking more than their share of the classes' time. As the years pass little or no time is allowed for the child

to pursue his or her own interests. The skills necessary for independent study are not taught and the materials needed for the child to pursue his or her own interests may be denied because they are intended for children of a different grade. Some of these children continue to be productive at home but many drop out of school and lead lives which do not utilize their gifts.

THE "CULTURALLY DIFFERENT"

Gifted children who are "culturally different" may also be underachievers. It may be difficult for the "culturally different" child to express himself or herself in a way which both reflects the values of personal culture and meets traditional school standards. Teachers need to value differences in personal performance that are due to the child's culture. At the same time, the child should be taught additional means of communication which will reach an even larger audience.

EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

A few gifted children become underachievers because of emotional problems serious enough to warrant professional help. Gifted children are vulnerable to all the problems which disturb other children. Parents or teachers should not allow seriously destructive behavior to go on or hesitate to seek help simply because the child is gifted. A gifted child is a child first, with a very limited number of years of experience, and should not be expected to solve serious emotional problems without help.

REVERSING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Underachievement, regardless of the cause, should not be thought of as irreversible. With parents and sympathetic, well-informed teachers working together, appropriate learning environments can be created which respect the learning characteristics of the gifted child.

TEACHERS OF THE GIFTED CHILD

HUMAN TRAITS

Teachers who work successfully with gifted children are very apt to have characteristics which account for that success. It is important that the teacher be interested in gifted child education, recognize that gifted children have genuine educational needs which are not being met within the regular curriculum, and have the skills necessary to plan and carry out an appropriate program.

Teachers of the gifted should be emotionally mature and have strong self-concepts. Working with children who learn rapidly, make original observations, and challenge ideas can be threatening to some adults. Teachers who are secure, highly intelligent, creative, flexible, resourceful and imaginative, establish good relationships with and good programs for talented and gifted children.

SKILLS NEEDED

Teachers of the gifted need to have knowledge about the nature and needs of children they serve. It is essential that the activities planned, materials selected and skills taught respond to the needs of the child.

Specific skills which are important for these teachers to possess include:

- o Utilizing tests and test results
- o Guiding a group discussion
- o Counseling and guidance
- o Creative thinking and problem-solving techniques
- o Guiding research
- o Relating thinking and feeling
- o Using classroom strategies which are particularly appropriate for gifted children

Teachers of the gifted also need to possess a high level of energy and be exceptionally well organized.

CONCLUSION

It is important to know the characteristics of talented and gifted children. By recognizing these characteristics, parents and teachers can provide learning environments which meet both their educational and emotional needs. Children who have the benefit of supportive parents and responsive educators are on their way to becoming happy, healthy, productive individuals who are capable of bringing about positive changes in our society.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON TALENTED AND GIFTED

Association for the Gifted (TAG)
Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091

Bob Siewart, Specialist for Talented and Gifted
Rod Meyer, Center for Program Coordination
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ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)
217 Gregory Drive
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